

**Preliminary Amendment of U.S. National Stage for International Application
PCT/EP2003/013563 Filed December 2, 2003**

In the Claims:

Please cancel claims 1-12, without prejudice, and add new claims 13-25, in accordance with the following complete listing of all claims ever presented. This listing of claims replaces all prior versions, and listings, of the claims in the instant application:

Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-12 (Canceled)

Claim 13 (New): A countercurrent process for the continuous esterification of C_{1-22} fatty acids with C_{1-10} monoalkanols, C_{2-5} di- or trialkanols or mixtures thereof, said process comprising (a) partially reacting the fatty acids and alkanols in a preliminary reactor in the liquid phase in the presence of an heterogeneous catalyst,

(b) passing the partially reacted reaction mixture to a separation unit,

(c) removing water from the partially reacted reaction mixture in the separation unit,

(d) passing the resulting de-watered, partially reacted reaction mixture to a countercurrent reaction column,

(e) further reacting the fatty acids and alkanols in the countercurrent reaction column in the liquid phase in the presence of heterogeneous catalysts, and

(f) removing the crude product from the bottom of the reaction column.

Claim 14 (New): A process according to claim 13, further comprising increasing the vapour load in the lower part of the reaction column by feeding nitrogen into the reaction column at the lowermost plate.

Claim 15 (New): A process according to claim 13, wherein the preliminary reactor is a fixed-bed reactor.

Claim 16 (New): A process according to claim 13, wherein the esterification reaction is carried out at temperatures of 50 to 200°C.

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Claim 17 (New): A process according to claim 16, wherein the esterification reaction is carried out at temperatures of 80 to 150°C.

Claim 18 (New): A process according to claim 13, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₁₋₁₀ monoalkanols.

Claim 19 (New): A process according to claim 18, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₁₋₈ monoalkanols.

Claim 20 (New): A process according to claim 18, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with isopropanol or 2-ethylhexanol.

Claim 21 (New): A process according to claim 13, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₂₋₅ di- or trialkanols.

Claim 22 (New): A process according to claim 21, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₂₋₃ di- or trialkanols.

Claim 23 (New): A process according to claim 21, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with glycerol.

Claim 24 (New): A process according to claim 13, wherein the esterification catalysts used are selected from the group consisting of organic or inorganic, basic or acidic anion or cation exchangers or acidic clays, zeolites or specially worked up bleaching earths and catalysts based on transition metals.

Claim 25 (New): A process according to claim 13, wherein acidic cation exchangers are used as the catalyst .